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SUBJECT: EXHUMATIONS HELP GUATEMALAN FAMILIES FIND CLOSURE

¶1. (U) Summary: Exhumations are helping bring closure to family members of the estimated 150 victims of a 1982 massacre in Lacama Segundo, an indigenous community in Chichicastenango, Quiche Department, an area that saw intense fighting during Guatemala's internal conflict. With the support of various Guatemalan NGOs, the indigenous community organization K'amalb'e has helped numerous families find and identify the remains of victims in this area. While Lacama Segundo continues to suffer the negative effects of the conflict, including fear of the army and lack of economic opportunities, K'amalb'e has helped families find closure. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On November 5, Poloffs and DAO attache traveled to Lacama Segundo, an indigenous community of about 1,200 people in Chichicastenango, Quiche Department, to witness an exhumation of victims of Guatemala's internal conflict. K'amalb'e, an indigenous community organization dedicated to helping families find victims' remains, organized the exhumation with the support of the NGO Families of the Detained and Disappeared of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA), the Archbishop's Office of Human Rights (ODHA), and the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), which USAID supports.

¶3. (SBU) According to Tomas Quino Mejia, president of K'amalb'e's executive board, the organization was founded in 1996 in the wake of the Peace Accords, when families realized there was "value in speaking about the past." It was not until 2000, however, that the organization conducted its first exhumation, when families finally felt safe enough to participate in the process. The organization conducts approximately four to six exhumations each year and has completed 38 to date. According to Quino, former Civil Defense Patrol (PAC, a citizens militia under the direction of the army) members, some of whom continue to live in the community, have threatened K'amalb'e members for conducting exhumations. Perpetrators of human rights abuses committed during the internal conflict often fear that evidence from exhumations could be used against them in formal court proceedings.

¶4. (SBU) According to Quino, on August 1, 1982, the Guatemalan Army killed 150 residents of Lacama Segundo, many of them women and children, for their alleged guerrilla support. While some community members may have been guerrillas, according to Quino, he doubted that such a large segment of the population, including children and the elderly, were involved in guerrilla activity. Jose Xon Tecum, secretary of K'amalb'e's executive board, speculated that a high-level military official from a nearby army base likely ordered subordinates to conduct the massacre. ODHA representative Luisa Nicolau agreed, stating that military members, not PAC members, committed most of the killings in Lacama Segundo.

¶5. (SBU) Representatives of FAMDEGUA, ODHA, FAFG, the Public Ministry, and approximately 20 relatives and friends of

victims traveled with Poloffs to the exhumation site, where, according to Nicolau, military personnel tortured and burned to death the parents of a Lacama Segundo resident in 1982. FAFG's forensic anthropologists, with the help of family and community members, found remains in a shallow grave and transported them to their laboratory in Guatemala City to identify the victims, using its new DNA laboratory inaugurated on November 4. Assistant Prosecutor Andres Gilberto Leon explained that the Public Ministry takes approximately 20 days to process the paperwork giving K'amalb'e legal permission to conduct an exhumation, although QK'amalb'e legal permission to conduct an exhumation, although K'amalb'e representative Quino stated that it could take up to four years. According to both Leon and Quino, approximately one year after the exhumation, FAFG will return the identified remains to family members, who can then give a proper burial to the deceased.

¶6. (SBU) Lacama Segundo, according to Quino, continues to feel the negative psychological, social, and economic effects of Guatemala's internal conflict. Residents continue to fear and mistrust the Army and worry that the government could again commit atrocities. Nicolau stated that some community members do not participate in exhumations out of fear that they will be identified by former PAC members who reside in the community. (Note: Poloffs encountered a group of community members who seemed to oppose the exhumation. One member referred to the remains with a derogatory Quiche term that means remains of an animal. The individuals may have been former PAC members. End note.)

¶7. (SBU) According to Xon, the 1982 massacre created many orphans, who grew up with little access to education or basic health care. Most community members are subsistence farmers, with little opportunity for other employment. Given this reality, Lacama Segundo members support and appreciate K'amalb'e's work since, according to Quino and Nicolau, the process of finding and identifying remains brings closure and dignity to victims' families. Some family members view exhumations as a form of vindication for the victims, according to Nicolau, even if the perpetrators may never be legally held accountable for their crimes.
McFarland